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Helms' Exit Linked To Kissinger Rift

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The impending resignation of Richard M. Helms as the nation's top intelligence officer can in large part be traced to a serious and continuing policy disagreement with Henry A. Kissinger, according to informed sources in the intelligence community.

The disagreement reportedly began with Helms' position in 1969 on a key intelligence issue — whether the Soviet Union, with its giant SS-9 missile, was going for a "first-strike capability." Helms took the less alarmed view.

Helms' departure, which has been confirmed by authoritative sources in the administration, has not been announced publicly pending a decision by the Central Intelligence Agency head to accept another position.

It is understood the new position will involve the foreign policy field and will be presented publicly as a promotion for the 59-year-old Helms, who has been involved in intelligence work ever since World War II.

Role Was Expanded

But insiders already are voicing skepticism that any job outside the intelligence field could be anything but a comedown for Helms, who is believed to have been anxious to stay on as CIA chief.

A key element in this view is the belief within the intelligence community that Helms had lost the confidence of the White House—Kissinger especially.

"Kissinger felt that Helms wasn't so much trying to support the administration as playing politics on his own—trying to keep his constituency together in the intelligence establishment," one source explained.

In all outward respects, however, Helms appeared to have been given President Nixon's full confidence, expressed both in public statements and in Helms' assignment just a year ago to a position of broadened responsibility in intelligence.

As a result of a sweeping reorganization of the intelligence community in November 1971, Helms' official title, Director of Central Intelligence, was expanded to include new budgetary and organizational authority over the whole \$5 billion a year U.S. intelligence effort.

The origin of Kissinger's dissatisfaction with Helms is said to reside in an incident, early in 1969, in which Helms made an intelligence assessment involving a fundamental question of national security that was sharply at odds with the view advanced by Pentagon

intelligence experts and held privately in the White House.

The incident was one of those rare occurrences when the latent disagreements in the intelligence community surfaced publicly, in this case in the persons of two rival chieftans, Helms himself and Melvin R. Laird, secretary of Defense.

At issue were the massive Soviet SS-9 intercontinental ballistic missiles, whose existence as a new weapon in the Soviet arsenal became known to intelligence early in the administration's first year.

Laird testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that the new missiles, which are capable of carrying a much heavier payload than anything deployed previously, meant that the Soviet Union was going for a "first strike capability."

About the same time, Helms let it be known that in his assessment the new missiles did not indicate a shift from the traditional emphasis on defense, and that the smaller Minuteman-style SS-11 would remain the backbone of the Soviet strategic missile arsenal.

Judgement Was Key

Later, in June 1969, both men appeared together before the committee in executive session, and their views were in some part reconciled. Helms is said to have deferred to the administration view, which was that the Pentagon intelligence assessment, championed by Laird, was the

one on which to base policy.

The administration has subsequently based some of its fundamental decisions in the nuclear strategy and national security fields upon that intelligence judgement. They include: ABM, whether to go ahead with rapid development of multiple missile warheads, and basic negotiating positions in the strategic arms control talks with the Soviets.

The Soviet Union has now clearly shifted to the SS-9 as its basic strategic weapon, and in this respect Helms' assessment appears in retrospect to have been wrong.

According to insiders, there have been other incidents, similar but less spectacular, likewise involving an assessment of Soviet strategic capability in which Helms and the Pentagon were at odds. In most of these, sources say, Kissinger has sided with the Defense Department.

The leading candidate to replace Helms is authoritatively reported to be James R. Schlesinger, chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission, and a chief architect of a study that shaped the intelligence reorganization.